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Voices on the Web: Online Learners and Their Experiences

Mary Katherine Cooper

Abstract: Online teaching and learning is the current push in education. While much research has been done on the numbers, there is still a perception that online learning is substandard. This interpretive study looks at the learner perceptions as they participate in masters' level courses on the web. Themes of schedule, geography, and family responsibility, as well as interaction, communication, and time are explored.

Introduction

With the push to provide online learning experiences, educators and learners alike are finding that while this form of distance education may not be optimal, it is an ever-increasing part of adult education. Many universities, colleges, and other organizations do not wish to be out of the technology loop, and so much in the way of resources is going to online initiatives. As a consequence, educators, and students are faced with new options and new challenges.

Much research has been done lately on this technology explosion. The numbers of programs has been studied (Chronicle of Higher Education, 1999, 2001), teaching strategies have been examined (Baker-Clark, 2002), and satisfaction has been evaluated statistically (University of XXX, 2002). What has come out of much of the research is that there is still a perception that face-to-face classroom experiences are considered more scholarly and preferred by learners, the online experience is not interactive enough, and faculty is overwhelmed with the amount of work that it takes to provide a good online experience (Cooper & Bielema, 2002). If this is the case, why then do the numbers continue to grow regarding participation in online learning? Is it all about the convenience of studying anyplace anytime that appeals to the adult learner?

Research Question and Methodology

As an educator that was given the charge to provide an online degree program, I have looked at the distance education literature of those who have gone before, and current studies being reported (Garrison, 2003; Granger & Bowman 2003; Hilgenberg & Tolone, 2000; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Scapin & Marega, 2000; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999; Weigel, 2002). Additionally, at our university we have measured, counted, and evaluated, but still did not have the complete picture. Because the situation appears to be much more complex than any measurement tool can address, I am conducting longitudinal qualitative (Interpretive) research. The primary research question is: What is the experience of pursuing a Master's degree via the Web? Secondary questions include, but are not limited to: Why are you taking courses online? Are you able to take classes at the university campus? These questions call for a phenomenological approach. Students were asked to share personal information and feelings

about the Internet learning process within the class discussion forum. Additionally, for those who wished to contribute to the research process, journals were kept to log problems, concerns and celebrations of successes. Text from these sources was used to determine the themes. Representative quotes are given to highlight the experience. In this paper the preliminary results of the study will be presented.

Findings

Within the literature of adult education we find evidence that adult learners can be encouraged to be self-directed; meaning they take responsibility for their learning process (Knowles, 1980). This is often translated into a need for arranging their learning schedules. One online learner spoke of this benefit:

I really enjoy being able to spend time with my family after getting home from work. The classes (at the university) cut into that time. After the kids have gone to bed I can log on and concentrate on my class work—it's nice to do it when it is convenient for me. I have to say that I still prefer the face-to-face but I wouldn't be taking 2 classes this semester if they were all on campus.

The arranging of schedules is an important topic for a variety of reasons: A single business person had a different perspective:

I never know when I am going to have to travel on business. Sometimes I can be around for weeks but then am gone for weeks. A lot of instructors don't like you to miss classes, but I can usually find a computer anywhere I go -except for that one time out in the rural area. You are flexible about that no matter how we take classes—but other teachers aren't.

But even if time, family responsibilities and geography are not a problem, there are those learners that like having the option. One gregarious young woman put it this way:

I love having class online, being able to think about my responses and taking the time to say things the way I mean them helps me to really think about the subject. Just wish I could see Dawn and Sharon in person...they are so much fun in class.

Taking the time to be able to make thoughtful comments in an asynchronous (anytime) discussion contributes to a dialog that is more inclusive. Indeed, some of the more outspoken students in the face-to-face classroom are not able to monopolize the online discussion, as they try to do in the classroom.

Probably the issue of greatest concern in any type of distance education course is that of interaction, both between the student and instructor and student to student (Scapin & Marega, 2000). To deal with the questions related to the course content and to encourage student-to-student dialog, weekly discussion topics were posted with questions based on assigned and outside readings (mini-lecture). Learners were expected to start a discussion thread based on the topic, with their classmates expected to respond in a thoughtful and scholarly manner to each new thread. In this way, critical thinking about the course material was encouraged. Indeed, the

Refereed Paper: Cooper

system was extremely interactive, with or without the instructors input. This interactivity was the driving force in the instructional design and has been found to contribute to student satisfaction in other online learning situations (Hilgenberg & Tolone 2000). Some of the comments about this interaction include:

I prefer a discussion with lots of different opinions and views. I know that some (maybe most) of you don't agree with a lot of the things I say--but for me, just putting my thoughts into words helps me better understand my own ideas. And it seems to me, that that is what this class is all about. So thanks, Everybody for putting up with my noise; but who knows you may learn something; I've learned a lot from you already.

And this:

Online, you have a lot more time to think through what you are going to say, review it, etc. In discussion, it's just out there for immediate reaction. I prefer more direct interaction but this is OK too for a change.

Within this process, the students also made recommendations to improve the technical aspects of the discussions, discussing both pros and cons:

Yes, the beauty of online courses is being able to respond when you can -- early morning, middle of the night, etc. I think there should be a "deadline" of when postings need to be made so that we're all keeping up.

And this from an excellent student:

Also, these forums drive me crazy because the comments/replies are not organized according to time of reply. So, I read them in the order in which Blackboard lists them and it's like having a backwards conversation sometimes. While I try to function at times in a nonlinear fashion, I am most comfortable when ideas can be arranged linearly.

Responding to student concerns about response time one instructor had this to say:

In any event, pick out and respond only those things that are the most important to you. If you want to talk about "speedy" or "slow," there are scores of comments by our participants I'd like to respond to, but I have to only pick and choose, because of my "speed" or "lack thereof." If I responded to every posting that I think worthy, I'd be on this "medium" possibly fifty-seven (57) hours a day. I haven't figured out how to stretch time into that.

Indeed, using sound adult learning principles such as setting up a learning environment where all are encouraged to question, contribute and comment is probably the most important aspect of the web-based learning experience. Both learner and instructor became more involved than in a face-to-face classroom.

According to Navarro and Shoemaker (2000), any cyber approach should have the following features, multimedia lectures that simulate classroom, a very active threaded

discussion and discussion groups as well as instant feedback . This environment promoted a great deal of learner-learner interaction that has been considered an important indicator of satisfaction among students.

Likewise, Granger and Bowman (2003) give the following as essential for building a learning environment:

- Learner centeredness within a context familiar to the learner.
- Individual construction of knowledge directed toward goals important to the learner.
- Contextual or experimental learning characterized by authentic interactions within the learning context (or community).

Additionally, in a study by Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999), it was found that course structure, feedback, and prior experience seemed to be indicators of a successful experience.

A person new to the masters program, but not to distance education, had this to say about the environment:

I was wondering how it was going to work, other classes I had, especially ITV were really boring. It was amazing how fast we got to know one another, made quite a few friends. The discussions were interesting probably because there were many experiences shared. This is the way to do it.

The option of obtaining a masters online will continue, parallel to the in-class offerings, but not as a replacement. Fine-tuning the web-base option continues to be an area of study.

Implications

As educators of adults, we have a responsibility to provide options to our learners. The use of multiple delivery methods is one way to that can be accomplished. The development of new skills using technology is both helpful to the students as learners and provides expertise that they will use as educators of adults. While this delivery method is offered to widen participation geographically, the distant learner does not make up the majority of the online student group.

At this time there are students who participate because of distance, however, there are a large number who take on-line courses primarily because of scheduling and other responsibilities. Included among these are learners who are not in the adult education program, most notably those in higher education and nursing.

Key to success in this type of learning environment is the ability of the learner to be self-directed (Garrison, 2003). While many of the students already demonstrate a great deal of autonomy by being active in the construction of their learning, for those outside of Adult Education especially, being active in the process can cause a great deal of anxiety. If this is not planned for in the design of the course, the amount of extra communication by the instructor to provide assurance can be magnified.

While many reasons for participation in web-based learning have been proposed, to this date it would appear that there is no one motivating factor. Just as the learners are varies in experience and learning style, so the impetus to learn at a distance is diverse. While this is an area that deserves further exploration, there are some conclusions to be drawn.

A course design that encourages an interactive adult learning environment is key (Hilgenberg & Tolone, 2000; Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999). Indeed, Granger and Bowman (2003) describe the change needed in the design of teaching and learning in order to respond to learner differences:

Within this setting, teaching and learning are no longer within the purview of autonomous teachers designing instructional environments to which passive learners arrive. Instead, learning resources are jointly identified by learners and teachers and assembled in a variety of formats; the teachers become facilitators of knowledge construction. Learners gain a greater degree of control over how, what, when and, where their learning occurs. (pp. 174-175)

This learner-centered environment which acknowledges the experiences of the learner, encourages interaction, and provides an arena where self-direction is encouraged, would seem at this time to be more important than the factors that motivated the individuals to enroll for an on-line experience.

As educators therefore, how we design the course and the provisions for interaction that are built into a web-based environment are the first item to consider. In design consideration of learner differences of motivation, style and experience are key. Continued research is needed in course design, teacher and learner experiences.

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Refereed Paper: Cooper

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Mary K. Cooper, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Adult Education, Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, University of Missouri-St. Louis, 269 Marillac Hall, St. Louis, MO; 63121-4499; cooper@umsl.edu

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